

## **Proposed Boundary Expansion Options for Consideration**

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources is proposing a project boundary expansion to the Peshtigo River State Forest as part of the overall property master planning process. The possible boundary expansion areas (see Proposed Boundary Expansion Map) are located in five blocks surrounding the existing boundary and total approximately 47,000 acres. These areas were selected because of their ability to produce additional ecological, economic, and social value for the property and region. Each of these areas has unique benefits and limitations, and will be discussed in detail below.

## **Purpose of Boundary Expansion**

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources administers an active land acquisition program for the purpose of protecting water resources, managing forests, providing wildlife and endangered resource habitat, and providing outdoor recreational and educational opportunities for all citizens. Acquisition of property within key project boundaries such as the Peshtigo River State Forest would provide resource managers with the necessary land base to implement specific natural resource and recreation responsibilities. These lands are held in trust for the public to enjoy for fishing, hunting, hiking, biking, sightseeing, bird watching, boating, swimming, outdoor education and numerous other public benefits.

One of the critical elements in natural resource management is forest and habitat fragmentation. When possible, creating large blocks of land improves native habitats and makes natural resource management more effective. This boundary expansion would allow for greater resource protection, particularly of endangered resources and the greater Peshtigo River watershed. There will also be improved connectivity with County and National forests, as well as access via local and county roads.

## **Current Boundary of Peshtigo River State Forest**

Established in 2001, the Peshtigo River State Forest is the smallest of Wisconsin's northern state forests, comprising 9,200 acres. Bordering the newly-created Governor Thompson State Park, the property is long and linear in shape, and surrounds the Peshtigo River and associated flowages from Roaring Rapids downstream to Spring Rapids. Farther downstream, the Potato Rapids Reservoir is also included in the state forest. The property borders approximately 25 miles of the Peshtigo River including: Caldron Falls Reservoir, a 1,180-acre reservoir; High Falls Flowage, a 1,670-acre reservoir; Johnson Falls Flowage, a 158-acre reservoir; the Fly Fishing Stretch of the Peshtigo River; and Potato Rapids Flowage, a 281-acre reservoir.

Located in an area with abundant publicly owned lands including County Forest lands, the Nicolet National Forest, and Governor Thompson State Park, the Peshtigo River State Forest is an excellent addition to the regional amenity base. Wisconsin Public Service Corporation, a natural gas and electric utility, was the former owner of the property and still maintains ownership of property adjacent to Peshtigo River State Forest, most

notably along High Falls and Johnson Falls reservoirs. Private landholdings are scattered along the current forest boundary and are likely to increase as private property owners seek to purchase highly desirable property adjacent to public lands.

### **Trends and Issues Facing the Peshtigo River Area**

- Large blocks of contiguous land changing hands rapidly.
- Development pressures are increasing and smaller parcels are being created.
- Demand for public access for water is increasing.
- Forested lands are becoming more fragmented.
- Demand for regional recreation trails is increasing.
- Some ecosystems/habitat types are rare or declining.
- More people are purchasing land.
- The demographics and values of forest landowners are changing.
- Protecting undeveloped river frontage is important.

### **Benefits of Proposed Boundary Expansion**

- Support regional recreation opportunities including connector trails.
- Protect high conservation value forests, unique habitats.
- Provide additional protection for the water quality of the Peshtigo River and tributaries.
- Protect undeveloped shoreline along the Peshtigo River and its flowages.
- Connectivity to other large blocks of public lands for recreation, ecological benefits.
- Long-term sustainability of high quality and productive forests.
- Improved access for recreational opportunities and enhanced management opportunities.
- Contribute to the economy of Marinette County through the harvest of forest products and through increased tourism.

### **Boundary Expansion Options**

Five areas have been identified as possible Peshtigo River State Forest expansion areas to address the ecological, economic and social trends facing the property and region. Each of these areas has unique benefits and limitations. Each area can be considered individual, all together or any combination. The Department considers each of these areas as having significant ecological, economic and social opportunities, but realizes the total acreage considered is significant. The objective is to work with local governments, landowners and others to identify strategies to meet the needs of all parties.

### Option 1: Core Expansion

This area surrounds most of the existing property boundary and encompasses 24,774 acres of land (see Core Expansion Map). This acquisition would provide additional protection to lands adjacent to the Peshtigo River and the river itself by consolidating existing properties of high conservation value. In addition, new public access points and regional trail linkages could be established.

#### *Acquisition Goals*

1. Consolidate and connect existing state holdings that contain important public values and/or facilitate efficient land management.
2. Provide a buffer against incompatible land uses that would diminish management options or visitor experience in the river corridor.
3. Protect critical portions of rivers or streams which, if protected, would ensure the quality of the larger watershed.
4. Establish new and enhance existing accesses to public waters and lands.
5. Provide the capability to support local and regional recreational trail developments including long distance trails and trails connecting to local routes and services.

### Option 2: Roaring Rapids

This area lies northwest of the Peshtigo River State Forest boundary and encompasses 4,666 acres of land (see Roaring Rapids Map). This acquisition would complete the protection of more than 50 miles of the upper Peshtigo River corridor as well as protect a unique and highly prized section of rapids. This would create a large continuous block of state, county and National Forest land along the river.

#### *Acquisition Goals*

1. Protect the Peshtigo River corridor, particularly this unique, highly prized section of rapids.
2. Provide linkages between blocks of existing public lands to provide important habitat connectivity, connect regional recreation trails and protect tributaries.
3. Provide additional public access to view a unique portion of the Peshtigo River, an important natural feature of statewide significance.

### Option 3: Eagle Creek Watershed

This area lies north of the Peshtigo River State Forest boundary and encompasses 7,603 acres of land (see Eagle Creek Watershed Map). Acquisition of this piece would create a large block of continuous forest land, most of which is presently under the ownership of the Board of Commissioners of Public Lands. It would also block state owned forest land with county owned forest land to create a larger, continuous block of public ownership. Another benefit of this acquisition is the protection of the Eagle Creek watershed, which flows into the Peshtigo River.

#### *Acquisition Goals*

1. Create a large block of continuous forest land, most of which is presently under a single ownership and could be secured to maintain and enhance existing public uses.
2. Connect state and county owned forest land to create a large, continuous block of public ownership.
3. To protect the Eagle creek watershed, which flows into the Peshtigo River.

### Option 4: Thunder River

This area lies west of the Peshtigo River State Forest boundary and encompasses 7,140 acres of land (see Thunder River Map). This is an especially important component of the proposed boundary expansion. This acquisition would not only protect the Thunder River - a major tributary of the Peshtigo River - but would provide a buffer around the Governor Thompson State Park. In addition, acquisition of this area would connect state and federal forest land in Oconto County.

#### *Acquisition Goals*

1. Protect the Thunder River, a major tributary of the Peshtigo River.
2. Connect state and National Forest land in Oconto County.
3. Provide a buffer around Governor Thompson State Park.
4. Protect established regional trail systems, including trailheads and spur trails between multiple owners, and provide an opportunity for new amenities.

### Option 5: Potato Rapids

This area lies north, west and east from the Peshtigo River State Forest boundary and encompasses 3,260 acres of land (see Potato Rapids Map). This acquisition will create a larger block of continuous forest land and provide a connection with Highway E. It will also provide watershed protection and improved access to the existing Potato Rapids portion of the forest.

#### *Acquisition Goal*

1. Create a larger block of continuous forest land, connected with Highway E and other public roads, providing watershed protection and improved access.

## Department Land Acquisition Policies

The Department is very sensitive to concerns raised by proposed boundary expansions. Any acquisition would require the Department to appraise the property and purchase the land from *willing sellers only*. All purchases by the Department are at fair market value based on an appraisal.

Local governments and communities are often concerned about the perceived reduction of the tax base when private lands come under public ownership. Unlike private landowners who pay taxes based on the assessed value of their property, lands purchased by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources after January 1, 1992 pay aids-in-lieu-of-taxes that are equal to property taxes that would have been paid had the land remained in private ownership. According to State Statute 70.11(1), property acquired by Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources comes off the tax roll. In lieu of the loss of tax base, each taxing jurisdiction receives an aid payment equivalent to property taxes.

The only difference between the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources aid-in-lieu-of-tax program and private lands is that the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' program relates to assessed value. For lands purchased by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources the initial assessed value is set at the purchase price of the property which is based on an appraisal. In subsequent years, this value is adjusted to reflect the change in the assessed value of the land in the taxation district. All other aspects of the way Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources pays aid-in-lieu-of-tax are the same as those for a local taxpayer.

As mentioned, properties in the Peshtigo River State Forest Boundary would be acquired only under a willing seller/willing buyer agreement, or by donation. The Peshtigo River State Forest emphasizes priority on acquisition of:

- Large tracts of undeveloped lands
- Parcels with water frontage
- Environmentally/ecologically sensitive areas
- Parcels for future recreation sites

This is accomplished by fee purchase, purchase of easements, exchange, donation, or conservation easements. There are some areas within Peshtigo River State Forest Boundary Expansion where the Department would not pursue acquisition including areas where subdivision plats have already been drafted. In addition, the Department would not pursue acquisition of land deemed undesirable, such as an abandoned dumpsite that could present a liability for hazardous materials. Acquisitions are subject to the approval of the Natural Resources Board and the Governor.